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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest outlines the methods employed and the results obtained from the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in U.S. history. NAEP surveys collect information about students' knowledge of core subjects of the school curriculum. This particular survey was administered to a national sample of students in grades 4, 8, and 12. Results of the survey indicate a general lack of competency in the area of U. S. history, especially when compared to other areas sampled in the 1990s by the NAEP. Demographics, institution-type, and teaching style all seemed to play a role in the determining student performance on the survey. The Digest offers recommendations for improving comprehension, recall, and interest in U.S. history. (KCM)

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ERIC Digest

by

John J. Patrick

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Clearinghouse for Social Studies/ Social Science Education

2805 EAST TENTH STREET • SUITE 120
INDIANA UNIVERSITY
BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA 47408
812-855-3838 • 800-266-3815

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The National Assessment of Educational Progress in U.S. History

by John J. Patrick

Since its inception by the United States Congress in 1969, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has collected information about what students in the United States know and can do in core subjects of the school curriculum. NAEPs in United States history were conducted in 1986, 1988, and 1994.

The 1994 NAEP in U.S. history was administered to national samples of students in grades four, eight, and twelve. Approximately 22,000 students answered a set of background questions pertaining to personal characteristics and experiences at home and school related to teaching and learning U.S. history. These respondents also were asked to complete a series of exercises that tested their knowledge and skills in U.S. history. This Digest reports on the framework and results of the 1994 NAEP in U.S. history.

The Framework. A 22-member planning committee comprised of historians, teachers, and history educators took primary responsibility for developing a framework to guide the structure and content of the 1994 NAEP in U.S. history. In addition, several hundred persons — historians, history educators, school administrators, representatives of professional associations, and members of the general public — contributed to the framework development process by participating in public hearings or writing critical reviews of drafts of the framework document. This process yielded the *U.S. History Framework for the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress*, which set specifications for the subsequent development and administration of the background questions and test items that comprised the assessment. This framework also provided the structure for interpretation of the results of the assessment.

Four themes in U.S. history are the core of the framework:

- Change and Continuity in American Democracy: Ideas, Institutions, Practices, and Controversies
- The Gathering and Interactions of Peoples, Cultures, and Ideas
- Economic and Technological Changes and Their Relation to Society, Ideas, and the Environment
- The Changing Role of America in the World

The four themes of the framework are related to each of the following eight periods of history:

- Three Worlds and Their Meeting in the Americas (Beginnings to 1607)
- Colonization, Settlement, and Communities (1607 to 1763)
- The Revolution and the New Nation (1763 to 1815)
- Expansion and Reform (1801 to 1861)
- Crisis of the Union: Civil War and Reconstruction (1850 to 1877)
- The Development of Modern America (1865 to 1920)
- Modern America and the World Wars (1914 to 1945)
- Contemporary America (1945 to Present)

The framework also includes ways of knowing and thinking about U.S. history. Two cognitive levels were used to guide exercise development: (1) a lower cognitive level involving recall and comprehension of knowledge and recognition of perspectives of different persons and groups in history and (2) a higher cognitive level involving analysis and interpretation of issues and events and use of evidence to make warranted generalizations about the past.

The framework required the assessment to include both multiple choice items and constructed-response items, open-ended questions that challenge students to use information and ideas to express in writing their thoughts on sources and events in history. In line with the framework, most of the assessment time was dedicated to exercises involving higher-level thinking skills.

The *U.S. History Framework for the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress* was developed before the National History Standards project began. It is not connected to the *National Standards for United States History*, which were produced by the National History Standards Project of the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA.

Report of Student Performance. Results for each grade — fourth, eighth, and twelfth — are reported according to three achievement levels: *Basic*, *Proficient*, and *Advanced*. The *Basic* level indicates partial mastery of knowledge and skills that are prerequisites for competency in U.S. history. The *Proficient* level represents competent academic performance in the knowledge and skills of U.S. history. The *Advanced* level indicates superior performance in U.S. history. The particular knowledge and skills denoted by each achievement level — *Basic*, *Proficient*, and *Advanced* — were determined, and the distinctions between achievement levels were set, by broadly representative panels of experts (e.g., master teachers, historians,

John J. Patrick is Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Director of the Social Studies Development Center, and Professor of Education at Indiana University. He was a member of the Planning Committee, 1994 NAEP U.S. History Consensus Project, which developed the framework for this assessment project.

education specialists, and members of the general public).

The *Basic* level was attained by 64 percent of fourth graders, 61 percent of eighth graders, and 43 percent of twelfth graders. The *Proficient* level was achieved by 17 percent of fourth graders, 14 percent of eighth graders, and 11 percent of twelfth graders. The *Advanced* level was reached by 2 percent of fourth graders, 1 percent of eighth graders, and 1 percent of twelfth graders.

Student performance on the 1994 NAEP in U.S. history was much lower than on previous NAEP surveys of the 1990s. A large majority at each grade — fourth, eighth, and twelfth — failed to achieve the *Proficient* level, which signifies solid or competent performance. An additional indicator of disappointing performance is the high percentage of students at the *Below Basic* level: 36 percent of fourth graders, 39 percent of eighth graders, and 57 percent of twelfth graders.

Performances on the 1994 NAEP in U.S. history varied significantly by certain group memberships. At all grades, for example, students identified as white and Asian tended to have higher scores than did those identified as black or Hispanic. In general, the higher the level of formal education students' parents had attained, the better the students performed on the assessment. And at all three grades, students in nonpublic schools tended to achieve higher levels of performance than did students in public schools.

Relationships of Home and School Experiences to Student Performance. Students participating in the 1994 NAEP in U.S. history were asked to complete questionnaires about their home and school experiences related to achievement in U.S. history. Their teachers were also asked to provide information about students' instructional experiences. The data revealed the following relationships:

- In general, greater amounts of time spent at home watching television, and little or no access at home to magazines and newspapers, were related to lower performance on the U.S. history assessment.
- Regular discussion of school work at home was related to higher performance on the U.S. history assessment. Students who reported no regular discussion had lower scores than all other respondents.
- Lack of homework assignments was related to lower scores on the U.S. history assessment.
- Fourth and eighth graders who reported more exposure to U.S. history instruction than their peers tended to have higher scores on the U.S. history assessment.

Few students and teachers in this assessment reported using primary documents regularly in the classroom. Most teachers reported heavy reliance on textbooks. However, occasional use of non-textbook materials, such as maps and videos, was related to higher student performance on the U.S. history assessment.

Conclusions. Too many students in the United States of America are not learning essential content and skills in U.S. history. This situation must be reversed if American students are to fulfill the high expectations for mastery of challenging subject matter in history that were presented in *The National Educational Goals Report* (1994). Keys to improvement of student performance in U.S. history are (1) increased exposure to formal instruction in this subject in elementary and secondary school classrooms; (2) use of non-textbook materials that engage students in higher-level cognition, and (3) supportive learning experiences in the home.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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